

## English Communication Problems and Needs from Social Engagement Perspective as Experienced by Airport Passenger-Handlers

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**Abstract.** *Airport and airlines service demand qualified employees to have proficient English communication skill to support smooth flow of airport and flights operation, primarily the workers involved in passenger-handling. English for Specific Purpose (ESP) course which fulfills the target needs could help such situation. This small scale study presents stakeholders' comments about the staffs' English communication ability and needs in the work setting (data collected through semi-structured interview) and problem of English communication encountered by the currently working staffs (through open-ended questionnaires as preliminary data and extended group interview or discussion). This paper reflects the experience of the airport passenger-handlers in Indonesia regarding with their challenges in performing English oral communication in the workplace. Analyzed from the perspective of social engagement, the problems and needs found in this study are possible to be the basis for ESP material betterment in the related field.*

**Key words:** *English communication, English in the workplace*

### A. INTRODUCTION

English for Specific Purpose especially in airlines industry apparently should become a prime concern in Indonesia since airlines business is one of the areas considered having primary roles of development in the program of ASEAN Economic Community (AEC), which has been established as of 2016, besides

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online service, tourism, medical and logistics. National Board of Profession Certification (Abdurrahman, 2015 as cited in Muhrofi-Gunadi, 2017) confirmed it. Consequently, the competitiveness of job-seeking among ASEAN countries has been increasing and so has the use of English as the communication tool in job setting, including in the airports and airlines companies. Therefore having a good command of English is one of the job requirements. ESP (English for Specific Purpose) course, especially EOP (English for Occupational Purpose) for airlines employees, plays a strategic role to assist the staff candidates to be competent. ESP trainers, practitioners, curriculum designers, and researchers need to work hand in hand to support ESP course for airlines industry.

However, in Indonesia, it appeared that ESP became an unpopular research subject in the preceded years, proved by Muhrofi-Gunadi (2017) in his study on research topics in TEFLIN (Teaching English as Foreign Language in Indonesia) conference in 2011 until 2014, shows that studies of ESP-EOP topic were surprisingly very few. During those years, the research topics varied, but EAP (English for Academic Purposes) dominated. It showed that ESP-EOP research in Indonesia is highly needed.

While Indonesia still seemed to put a little anticipation on ESP development, research about ESP in international scope has still developed and specifically studied in the recent time. Taiwan was one of the countries that put significant concerns on ESP development by the number of journal writings and articles found; even there was an ESP conference in 2015. The area of ESP research focused on specific topics, such as: culinary (Hou, 2013), nursing (Ramos, 2015); customer service (Lockwood, 2017); tourist police in Jordan (Aldohon, 2014), tourism (Rittapirom, 2017; Prachanant, 2015; Kang, 2011), pharmacy (Kosasih, 2017), in business (Yan and Yang, 2016; Zhang, 2013; Evans, 2012) and many others. The articles about Aviation English dominantly exposed communication between the pilot and air traffic controllers (Parohinog and Meesri, 2015; Karimi

and Vahdani, 2014; Knoch, 2014; Kim and Elder, 2014). Study about aviation English, especially on passenger-handling communication remained very rare, and the researcher hardly found any of it in Indonesia. In China, Ting (2010) studied ESP learners' needs which focused on information desk staff in Beijing airport. Meanwhile, in Europe, Cutting (2012) investigated languages used by airport ground officers by airport visit accompanied by an English-native-speaker linguist. Therefore, the researcher feels that ESP studies primarily on aviation English in the area of passenger handling is still essential including in Indonesia, considering airlines is one of the vital sectors in universal service.

The education system of ESP-EOP in Indonesia shall be more efficient in practice, and the teachers need to put a greater endeavor than some other ASEAN countries as English is a foreign language. The rapid growth of aviation training centers and academy will need appropriate materials for the students, including proper English they are going to use in their future workplace. Basturkmen (2006) suggested needs analysis as a method to compose the material which meets the target need. It is the most modern and suitable methodology in ESP according to Hutchinson and Waters (1991, p.53). There has been a higher number of ESP studies applied Need Analysis (NA) compared to other methodologies, namely: ethnography, English as lingua franca (ELF), genre, and corpus. ESP curriculum and teaching materials require evaluation, revision, and update to ensure their quality to assist students in acquiring English based on their needs.

Domains of ESP, as stated by Basturkmen (2006) are EAP (English for Academic Purposes), EPP (English for Professional Purposes), and EOP (English for Occupational Purposes). Further, Widodo (2015) extended the domain by adding EVP (English for Vocational Purpose) or VE (Vocational English) developed in secondary education. In EVP, the learners introduced to particular English which integrates with general English as the starting approach for ESP development (it

could be academic, professional, and occupation) in the higher education, depending on the particular discipline or interest they might choose.

The components of EVP or vocational-oriented language learning, added by Widodo (2015), involve social engagement, including language, knowledge, and activity, which influenced by social environment “that holds a particular culture and identity.” In other words, this approach emphasizes that ESP learning focuses on social practices or actions in a particular field or interest. The learners introduced to social engagement components as a unity in performing English communication to function in their employment.

Sifakis (2003), as cited in Handoyo (2010), listed several characteristics of ESP, namely: knowledge skill, general English competence, vocational competence ( a particular task in the workplace), subject specificity (vocational and general), learning motivation, cultural identity, and belief. Thus, ESP is not just about the language but also must prioritize the culture and cannot be separated from specific knowledge of the subject for the learners to perform better in the workplace. Thus, although general English might help for an excellent English communication, it is not sufficient for learners who are prepared to use certain English of a particular field.

As far as it is concerned, there is a need of adequate material for ground staff especially in passenger handling division although the educations or trainings are in non-formal area. This study is an initial phase in needs analysis, which intends to look deeper into some facts in the aviation industry by gaining feedback from stakeholders and finding out communication problems encountered by working staffs.

## **B. RESEARCH METHOD**

### ***Data Collection***

This qualitative study presents the responses of stakeholders and reflections by the workers related to their English communication problems encountered while they are on-duty. There were seven available sources taken purposively. The data gathered through questionnaire and in-depth semi-structured interviews. Document study is also used to collect supplementary data revealing the fact of English ability requirement among the staffs of passenger handling.

### ***Research Subjects***

There were two people as stakeholders interviewed: an HRD manager and a station coordinator of the related airport company. The activity was to gain information about their expectations and the staffs' performance in the sense of procedural activities performed in the workplace. It was regarding their English communication while they're doing the jobs, answering the first research question: what do the stakeholders expect the staffs of passenger handling to possess or perform, related to English communication competence in the workplace?

Besides, six persons working as officers of passenger handling at an international airport in Indonesia are also interviewed to share their experience regarding English communication in their working environment to answer the second research question: what are the English communication problems encountered by the staffs of passenger-handling? Before the interview, the officers filled out a preliminary open-ended questionnaire related to personal identity including job position, working length, and whether they had a problem in English communication during their working hours. Extended interviews were done in two months. In this paper, the informants' real names are kept confidential.

*HRD Manager – Respondent (Res) A*

The person is a lady who has been working in airport – airlines industry for almost 14 years. As HRD manager, she selects employees based on the company requirements.

*Station Coordinator – Respondent (Res) B*

With 13-years job experience in airport management companies, this lady is positioned as a station coordinator in the same airport with Res B.

*Passenger-handling Staffs*

Based on the preliminary interview with Res A and B, the passenger-handling division consists of five positions; greeting service, check-in, security check, lost & found, and boarding (or arrival). There are six staffs agreed to get involved in this study. *Res 1 GR*, is a greeting service staff, one year working. *Res 2 CK*, is check-in staff, ten months working. *Res 3 CK*, is a check-in staff, eight months working. *Res 4 LF*, is a Lost and Found staff, one year working. *Res 5 BA*, is a boarding and arrival staff, seven months working. The last was *Res 6 SC*, is a security check staff, five months working.

*Data Analysis*

The data from the interview were transcribed and analyzed through listing, coding, and classifying, relied on the triangulation of sources. Data were presented based on categories from the aspects of social engagement (Widodo, 2015); language, knowledge, activity, following Hutchinson and Waters' target needs theory (1985), as a discovery of the necessity, lack, and expectation of those three. And finally, the conclusion was drawn as a recommendation of English communication skill components needed by the staffs of passenger-handling for ESP teachers, practitioners, and material or curriculum developers.

## C. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

### *Findings*

The results of this study are presented by each informant's response in summary.

#### *The HRD Manager, Res A*

From Res A's information, supported by the document of employee recruitment procedure, the company has a certain expectation in recruiting staffs. For passenger-handling, the educational background minimal requirement is a senior high school graduate. However, having study experience related to aviation is so much preferable. To be able to communicate in English is a lot valuable, and Basic English for oral communication test undertaken at the interview stage. However, it is scarce to find candidates who can speak English very well among the young ladies and gentlemen who are mostly under 25 years old. Considering the total of foreign passengers that is approximately 20% of the total passengers which may increase, this thing is such a big deal when they cannot speak adequate English. On the other hand, she also admitted that the staffs of passenger-handling still need much improvement regarding their English communication skill.

The officers of passenger handling, Res A added, must possess a good communication skill as well as self-confidence. They also have to understand the job description, procedures, and activities performed by the staffs of their position. To speak English appropriately based on the procedures and job tasks is another priority.

#### *The Station Coordinator, Res B*

From Res B's explanation, the five positions in passenger handling have different job descriptions. *Services (Greeting) position* is responsible for greeting and giving assistance to passengers, to guide them if they need a particular help, especially special passengers that need specific treatment or

procedures such like; VIP passengers, passengers with disabilities, and pregnant women. *Check-in position* has a responsibility to proceed checking-in passengers, hand boarding passes, manage seat numbers, and handle checked baggage. *Security check position* or known as AVSEC (Aviation Security), will deal with the safety of passengers and their belongings, to check and ensure flight safety. *Boarding or arrival (waiting room)* will greet & assist passengers in the waiting room during the boarding process. *Lost and found position* is in charge to handle and checks baggage after the flight, to deal with passenger's missing luggage and the owner's complaint.

Res B stated that in the airport she works, the staffs of passenger handling still have low English proficiency and communication skills. It is possible that some misunderstanding happened i.e. about flight schedule due to poor English communication skill among the staffs. Beside language ability, they also need to enrich their knowledge about airport operation and job procedures based on particular position, as every job in passenger handling is responsible for different duties. Among the five positions, the employees of check-in, greeting service, and lost & found are those who will use English much more than the other positions. Res B also explained further about the job activity and demands for each post.

*A 'greeting service' staff, Res 1 GR*

This young man feels that he has some problems with confidence and anxiety. He often deals with particular passengers. Sometimes, he got trouble in understanding the utterances by the international passengers when they asked something. "It took a while for me to understand their speech." Some other times he could know what they meant but failed to respond accurately.

*A check-in staff Res 2 CK*

She feels that she has difficulty in catching some words or idea by the passengers. For her, they speak too fast and sometimes use unusual words. She often feels lost



in the middle of a conversation, additionally when the topic is out of routines or job-related. For standard and essential conversation, she thinks she is doing well.

*A check-in staff, Res 3 CK*

She feels she needs more vocabulary to support her communication skill orally. She still has trouble in listening to the passenger's English. Moreover, there are many passengers speak various English accents, even make it harder for her to get engaged and follow the communication pace.

*A lost and found staff, Res 4 LF*

He meets foreigners pretty often. They used to complain about their baggage that did not arrive within the same aircraft. This position is a challenge for him. He has to deal with the complaint and asking questions about the bags. At many times, he needs to address emotional passengers, too. Thus, he needs to broaden his vocabulary that he thinks is still very poor. Sometimes he understands what the passengers say, but cannot express the response well.

*A boarding and arrival staff Res 5 BA*

She admitted that she got troubled in pronunciation. When she has to do boarding call, for example, sometimes she felt nervous and anxious about how she should utter a word. She also needs to improve how to ask and answer the question in a better way. Confidence and vocabulary richness are also needed to improve because of being aware that she cannot perform English communication well.

*A security check Staff, Res 6 SC*

Dealing with English speaking passengers, this man serving as this position explained that sometimes he found it hard to tell sort of instruction he has to perform. Mostly, he needs to concern about imperative sentence types, investigation, and acknowledgement of international law of flight security. He

added that during his length of work this far, he could speak English although not very well. He needed more vocabulary and practice to make it better.

### ***Discussion***

As stated in the literature review, the analysis of needs can also be the analysis of lacks or problems, and the demands as well. The problems and the needs of English communication found written below are categorized from the social engagement perspective: language, knowledge, and activity (Widodo, 2015)

#### ***Language Problem***

There are several challenges faced by the passenger-handlers in English oral communication both passively and actively. The problems in this case include listening, responding, and some psychological problems.

In listening, the workers are still struggling when they involve in conversation. To be specific, based on the interview, the problems in listening are: failing to catch the uncommon utterance which sounds strange to them, feeling lost in longer talks, missing the spoken words or points, having a hard time to understand many kinds of English accents, often feeling misunderstood because of inadequate vocabulary, having trouble in following the speaking pace which (they think) is too fast.

In responding or speaking, although they are quite accustomed to speaking based on procedures or routines, the staffs still feel that they have low speaking ability in some aspects: problem in responding the questions efficiently and comfortably, little skill in accuracy because of poor vocabulary, difficulty in pronouncing words (sometimes causing minor misunderstanding), failing to express idea dealing with the topics outside the routines, trouble in fluency (cannot perform smooth flow of speaking).

Some psychological problems are also noticed, all of the workers feel lack of confidence when involving in English oral communication. They also have the fear of making mistakes, nervousness, and anxiety. Then, they also admit and feel that they still have low English proficiency.

### *Knowledge Needs*

Based on the interview with stakeholders and the real experience of passenger handlers in the job setting, the staffs of passenger handling must own sufficient knowledge about these aspects: aviation vocabulary, general basic English, and job procedures

Vocabulary mastery is very crucial in communication. For them, it is essential to gain vocabulary richness about: people, things and places in the airport and the duties or functions, basic words about airplane/aircraft and its interior, traveling vocabularies, including flights schedules, travel documents, airport and flight operations, etc. General basic English will have the passenger-handlers deal with giving directions, alphabets and numbers, time-telling, hospitality manner, addressing form, and some basic easy conversational topics. English ability surely must be related to job procedures. The staffs also need to know comprehensively about airport operation, the flow of boarding and arriving passengers, and the standard procedures of the related position.

### *Activity Needs*

In greeting service, the first internal staff that the boarding passengers will meet, several activities needed to concern are: polite and appropriate greeting/welcoming (hospitality manner), asking and checking the passengers' tickets, handling questions about flight, check-in counter or others, handling VIP and VVIP passengers, also assisting passengers with special needs to direct them based on the rules or procedures.

Check-in position must know how to do greeting appropriately, asking and checking passengers' documents, dealing with luggage rules and baggage weight, informing flights and boarding process, offering seats on the plane, dealing with the belonging rules and restrictions, also anticipating particular issues (passengers' health problem, lateness, complaints, suspicious passengers).

The staffs at security check will be dealing with a lot of imperative and warning forms, investigating if there is a suspicious thing found or action observed, sticking to the rules of aviation security, and directing the passengers who passed the inspection

For Boarding / Arrival, the staffs need to perform these tasks appropriately: asking and checking the boarding passes and passengers' identity, dealing with the questions about flight schedule and gate, informing changing schedules, gate, or planes, also dealing with passengers' problems, questions or request of guidance, and checking the bag tags and the baggage as well.

Lost and Found will need to know how to ask the passengers' problems related to baggage, provide appropriate and clear answers as solution, ask related questions about the bag and the report completion, and face passengers that may come with unstable emotions

#### **D. CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTION**

##### ***Conclusion***

The problems and the needs of airport staffs in passenger-handling are revealed. The officers still struggle with language, especially their English oral communication during the service in their workplace, which means that they have

not fulfilled the company's expectation yet. Meanwhile, the needs of the future officers in passenger-handling to learn before their job involvement are: knowledge (involving vocabulary, general English, job procedures) and activity (the actions or procedures performed by each kind of position of passenger-handling).

### ***Suggestion***

The findings and discussion above are excellent resources as the basis of ESP material development or betterment, especially for airport passenger-handling occupation. The ESP teachers or practitioners in the related field can develop the details by integrating problems and needs presented as a rich unit of materials. However, further studies with larger scale are absolutely expected to attain more comprehensive investigation and findings.

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